



HD Activist Isaac Vergun discusses the importance of youth climate action

WC 880 words

PD 15 February 2020

SN U-Wire

SC UWIR

LA English

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LP

Pennsylvania State University ; University Park, PA - news

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Isaac Vergun, the federal plaintiff in Juliana v. United States and a 17-year-old climate activist, visited Penn State on Feb. 14 to discuss youth climate action and the dangers of climate change.

Vergun's visit is part of various climate-related events Penn State is holding as Earth Day approaches in April.

In 2015, Vergun and 21 other youth climate activists filed a lawsuit against the federal government under the claim that the government had violated their rights to life and liberty by allowing for the continued use of fossil fuels and emissions of greenhouse gasses.

Vergun said each of the 21 youth federal plaintiffs are involved in the lawsuit because of the harms they've had to endure due to climate change.

For Vergun, these harms are medical — the changing climate and emission of greenhouse gasses has taken a toll on his asthma and makes it difficult to breathe, resulting in him having to avoid the outdoors on several occasions.

"We're saying that us 21 youth are affected by climate change because of our governments inaction, throughout various administrations," Vergun said. "This lawsuit began under a Democratic administration and has gone through a Republican administration and neither have held themselves accountable for these harms."

The lawsuit has faced a number of dismissals, denials and postponements, according to Vergun. Finally, the trial was set to begin on Oct. 29, 2018 when the Trump administration filed a second writ of mandamus petition and application for stay with the U.S. Supreme Court in an attempt to stop the case from proceeding.

The attempt was successful, and on Oct. 29, thousands of people protested for the youth's right to be heard at trial.

"Not only did we the plaintiffs all sacrifice our time to participate in this big lawsuit, but we also had supporters come from all over the country and the world to see this monumental lawsuit happen," Vergun said.

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Vergun described the lawsuit as being “a turbulent journey” for him and his family, as they now wait for a decision from the Ninth Circuit about their appeal.

Despite the setbacks those involved with the lawsuit have faced, Vergun said he is still hopeful that their hard work will result in a victory for youth across the country.

“Once, not if, we win the lawsuit, we are asking the courts to create a climate recovery plan with accurate climate science to force the government to reduce their emission to zero,” Vergun said.

Vergun is also the co-founder and lead youth climate leader with Youth Acting for our Earth, where he leads free one-day training to youth in grades four through 12, in which students are taught public speaking skills and informed on the dangers of carbon emissions.

He co-founded Youth Acting for our Earth with his mother Pam Vergun to educate both young people and their parents about the climate crisis and how it has directly impacting them.

“A lot of times the kids don’t know what to expect and we start by saying, ‘You can really do this,’” Pam Vergun said. “By the end, they’re going up to their parents, community members, their town’s mayor, and local politicians giving the same presentation they learned that morning about climate change, but with no notes.”

Pam Vergun said she often gets the question, “Why is this necessary when we have young climate activists like Greta Thunberg already sparking change?”

Her answer is simple — she said that all kids, whether they consider themselves activists or not, are impacted by climate change. Because of this, she said they should be able to lead the discourse in offering solutions.

Mario Rodriguez Cruz, a lifelong friend of Vergun’s, spoke at the event and discussed his own experiences in YAE. He said what began as pure interest turned into him becoming a youth climate leader to teach other youth about climate activism.

“It was such a great experience getting to be a part of their group, learning about the dangers of climate change and becoming a youth climate leader,” Rodriguez said. “A year ago, I led my first training in my hometown and I got to see what Pam does on a regular basis. I learned that it’s not easy work, it’s hard and there are a lot of steps but it’s worth it.”

Isaac and Pam Vergun will lead youth climate training sessions at the Unitarian Universalist Church in State College on Feb. 15 where youth will learn public speaking tools to utilize in the fight against carbon emissions. The sessions are free and open to youth grades four through 12.

“We all need to work as a collective to make a better future for ourselves and future generations,” Vergun said.

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